

Chapter 1: Autism: What is it? Autism has been defined as “a pervasive developmental disorder, which is characterized by impairments in communication and social interactions, and restricted, repetitive, stereotypical patterns of behavior, interests and activities. Autism is a complex neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain.” (American Psychiatric Association (APA), 1994).

Today we’re going to take a look at 5 effective teaching strategies that will help students with autism be successful in the classroom.

Number 1: Create a daily routine for the classroom environment that allows the student to feel comfortable and successful. For example, in high school, an arrival routine may be implemented that includes entering the room, getting their folder from a class bin, and taking their assigned seat. These types of everyday routines help provide structure and stability in the mind of a child with autism. They will know what is expected of them from the moment they walk in.

Number 2: Provide a structured, predictable classroom environment. Displaying a visual daily schedule or agenda will provide consistency and clarity of the days events. This lets students know what activities are going to happen in a sequenced, timely fashion. Doing this can also smooth transitions as you go from task to task, reducing any anxiety that children with autism face when change takes place. Many students with autism don’t know how to handle unstructured times and may need this guidance to continue with their day.

Number 3: Make known any major changes or disruption of regular routine. Students with autism often experience severe anxiety when unexpected events occur. For example, if a fire drill is planned for a certain time that day, the teacher should let the class know ahead of time and possibly review the appropriate procedures for the event. This way, the students are prepared for any disturbance of routine.

Number 4: Use meaningful reinforcements for positive behaviors. It is important to remember that students with autism may not be motivated by ordinary or commonly used reinforcements. Getting to know your student with autism will assist in creating an individualized reward that is meaningful to them and will serve as a motivator through learning activities. For example, some may just want some time to themselves or read their favorite magazine, while others may enjoy taking a walk with a favorite staff member.

Number 5: Use visual representation as often as possible. Using objects or manipulatives are the most concrete form of visuals and also implement sensory stimuli. Any form of picture or graphic display of information allows the student to process as long as they need after the verbal explanation has been given.

Number 6: Effective communication and social skills: Most students with autism struggle with communicating how they feel and what they need or want. Make sure that every student can appropriately communicate in expressive and receptive forms. Students with severe social limitations may require the use of an augmentative device or alternative visual systems to communicate effectively. Others may need a “green yellow red” card system to identify feelings and interact with peers and adults. Teaching students how to interact in games and group activities may need to be done prior to doing so. Activities such as waiting in line or taking turns playing with a toy are not second nature to children with autism and may need to be taught and modeled by a teacher or adult.

As educators, it is important to remember that every child is unique in their own way, and may have needs that require strategies for successful outcomes. Talk with parents and other teachers, and truly try to get to know your students to create the most positive learning environment for all.